

# Designing out destitution from our asylum system

No one in our communities should experience destitution, whatever their migration status. But the asylum system drives destitution and hardship in multiple ways, including through problems with and delays in asylum decision-making, the very low level of asylum support payments and restrictions on the right to work. A short ‘move on’ period from asylum accommodation on being granted refugee status results in a heightened risk of hardship even as people transition out of the asylum system.

It is extremely likely that the implementation of the Illegal Migration Act will further increase the risk of destitution among people seeking safety in the UK. It should be repealed.

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## Recommendations

Government should:

- Commit to more efficient, accurate and timely decision-making in the asylum system and a process for calculating and uprating levels of asylum support so people can afford the basic essentials.
- Give asylum seekers and their adult dependants the right to work after six months, not limited to the Shortage Occupation list.
- Extend the ‘move on’ period from asylum accommodation to 56 days, to give people more time to transition into secure housing, work and/or benefits support.

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## No one in our communities should experience destitution

Everyone in our communities should have a safety net to fall back on in hard times and government policy should not drive people into destitution, no matter where they have come from or how. These are not radical statements, yet they are at odds with where we currently find ourselves.

We must reshape our migration and asylum systems so they do not drive hardship and destitution. This includes addressing the drivers of deep poverty within our asylum system.

Our latest *Destitution in the UK* report with Heriot Watt University reveals that people with experience of the UK asylum system continue to experience destitution at disproportionately high rates, with around 150,000 households in the asylum system experiencing destitution in 2022 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2023).

This briefing focuses on the connection between seeking asylum in the UK and the risk of experiencing deep poverty and destitution – highlighting the urgent case for action. And it sets out a range of practical recommendations from across the sector for how to build an asylum system which protects people from destitution.

### The Illegal Migration Act

It is essential to note that the recommendations across these briefings sit against the backdrop of the Illegal Migration Act which was voted through Parliament despite significant widespread opposition from experts across civil society (JCWI et al, 2023), Parliament and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2023).

It is extremely likely that the implementation of the Act will increase the risk of destitution among people seeking safety in the UK (NACCOM and Praxis, 2023). Alongside the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, this legislation will remove or significantly restrict the rights of people seeking refuge and asylum in the UK. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) joined many others in calling for the Bill not to be passed in the form it was presented in because of these risks (Hay, 2023).

We are deeply concerned about the potential impacts of this new law and would urge the Government to listen to the widespread calls from expert organisations and parliamentarians (Fight the #anti-refugee laws, 2023) to repeal the recently implemented laws, and to instead work towards a refugee protection system that treats people with dignity and compassion.

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## Ensuring people claiming asylum do not experience destitution

Alongside restricted eligibility to access public funds, and long and costly routes to settlement, there are other features of our immigration and asylum system which create avoidable hardship for people who have come to the UK from elsewhere.

Over 75,000 people claimed asylum in the UK in the 12 months up to Q1 2023 (Gov.uk, 2023a), including increasing numbers of unaccompanied children. When people come to the UK seeking safety, they should be able to expect a fair and timely assessment of their claim. But current, and well-discussed, problems in this system are trapping people in limbo awaiting a decision, with very low levels of financial support, and typically no permission to work.

### Problems with and delays in asylum decision-making

The first – and most high-profile – problem is delays in asylum decision-making exacerbated by the ongoing backlog of cases. The latest data shows a record high of 175,457 people waiting for an initial decision as of June 2023 – an increase of 44% from June 2022 (Walker, 2023). Of those waiting for an initial decision, 139,961 people had been waiting more than six months. Previous evidence suggests waits can be significantly longer: figures obtained by the Refugee Council (2022) showed that, in June 2022, a third (40,913) of people waiting for a decision on their initial claim had been waiting between one and three years.

And decision-making is not just slow – it can also be bad quality. According to Home Office data, of appeals against initial asylum decisions made in the year up to March 2023, just over half (53%) were successful, up from 29% in 2010 (Home Office, 2023). Having to process appeals based on initial faulty judgments further clogs up the system and exacerbates delays for people awaiting a fair decision.

This significant backlog, in conjunction with the low levels of financial support available while people are waiting for a decision and restrictions on the right to work, can trap people in hardship for long periods of time. This in turn stops people who have a long-term future in the UK from putting down roots quickly and integrating into their local communities.

### Low levels of asylum support

People waiting for their claim to be processed are eligible for asylum support payments and accommodation, but evidence suggests that the low level of financial support provided is forcing people to go without essentials like food and toiletries (Asylum Matters, 2020). Prior to 2008, asylum support levels tracked mainstream benefit rates; since then, they have failed to keep up. As living costs continue to spiral, the basic rate of asylum support is £47.39 a week per person in a household, or £9.58 per person if you are in asylum accommodation which provides meals (Gov.uk, 2023b).

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In contrast, the Universal Credit (UC) Standard Allowance for a single person aged 25+ – which itself is not enough to afford the essentials – is £85 a week, while the UC child element is around £62 a week. In combination with the growing asylum backlog, this means people are forced to get by on incredibly low levels of financial support for increasingly lengthy periods of time.

### **Restrictions on the right to work**

People claiming asylum can currently only apply for permission to work after they have been waiting 12 months for a decision. Those granted permission can only do jobs on the Shortage Occupation List, and adult dependants of people applying for asylum – who are more likely to be women (Lift The Ban, 2020) – cannot apply for permission at all. This is a more restrictive policy than in lots of comparable countries (ibid).

Research and evidence also suggest that the government’s rationale of avoiding migration ‘pull factors’ to the UK by restricting the right to work is not well founded (ibid.).

Allowing people to move into work more quickly would allow people to use their talents, support themselves and their families, contribute to the local economy and put down roots in their local communities. It could also decrease the risks of exploitation, forced labour and modern slavery. Previous analysis from the Lift the Ban Coalition has suggested allowing people to work after six months could bring cost-saving benefits to government of £97.8 million a year (ibid.). Overall, this is a policy change which could bring a wide range of benefits – both to people seeking asylum, and to the UK more widely – while bringing the UK in line with international norms around the right to work.

### **A ‘move-on’ period which drives destitution**

Finally, if people are granted refugee status, evidence shows that transitioning out of our asylum system also brings a heightened risk of hardship. After receiving a positive decision on their asylum claim, people granted refugee status have, until very recently, received just 28 days to move on from asylum accommodation – meaning they need to have arranged alternative housing and work or benefits support during that period. A recent concerning policy change to the move-on process has meant that many people granted refugee status in recent months have been receiving just seven days’ notice (Solomon et al, 2023). Since this change came into force in August 2023, the British Red Cross (2023) has reported a 140% increase in destitution amongst people they support who have refugee status.

Research from refugee and asylum and poverty organisations has shown that giving people such a short period of time in which to make themselves settled and secure increases people’s risk of destitution and homelessness (Smith, 2019; British Red Cross 2020). For this reason, many organisations have called for government to extend this move-on period to 56 days to help enable a better transition for people who have been newly granted refugee status (Solomon et al, 2023), and called for Government

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to strengthen the Home Office's duties to refer people to homelessness support during this period (Homeless Link and NACCOM, 2022).

## Recommendations

If people come to the UK for safety, government should commit to making decisions on their asylum claim which are accurate and timely, ensuring no one goes without essentials while they wait and giving people security as soon as possible so that they can put down roots and thrive. This should be based on the underpinning principle that no one in our communities should be experiencing deep poverty or destitution, whatever their migration status.

JRF does not have expertise on asylum policy, but we can see the strong connection with deep poverty and destitution. Building on calls from across the poverty and immigration and asylum sector, we recommend:

- Government must commit to more efficient, accurate and timely decision-making in the asylum system, ensuring people aren't left in limbo for long periods, and enabling people whose asylum claim is accepted to move on with making the UK their home. British Future has proposed a series of reforms to help speed up and streamline decision-making, including hiring a task force to tackle the current backlog, which they calculate would cost around £60 million. They propose that with emergency accommodation for people seeking asylum costing government £5.6 million a day at the time of publication, this investment would pay for itself in just two weeks (Katwala et al, 2023).
- Government should commit to the principle that people receiving support from the UK Government must always be able to afford the basic essentials. This should involve a clear process for calculating and uprating levels of asylum support and clearly linking the levels of support to people's essential needs. A first step could be to implement the recommendation of members of the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum (NASF) to return the rate of asylum support to at least 70% of the over-25s rate of mainstream benefits (Gov.uk, 2021), its previous level.
- If people are waiting a long time for their asylum decision, they should be able to support themselves and their families through work more quickly, rather than being forced to rely solely on asylum support. JRF supports the cross-sector coalition calling for government to give asylum seekers and their adult dependants the right to work after six months, not limited to the Shortage Occupation list (Lift The Ban, 2020). This would bring benefits for people seeking asylum in terms of financial security and integration, and savings on public spending.

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- Elsewhere in these briefings JRF addresses the fundamental importance of access to advice and legal aid. Good-quality advice and support, including access to legal aid, is particularly important in making sure that more correct asylum decisions are made the first time around. It is key to ensuring people are supported in any appeals or new applications, can more easily access routes to regularisation and do not experience insecurity and destitution due to a lack of timely advice and support.
  - Government must do more to help people achieve security as they transition out of our asylum system so that they can avoid destitution during this high-risk period. We support calls for government to extend the ‘move on’ period from asylum accommodation to 56 days, to give people more time to transition into secure housing, work and/or benefits support. One option could be to pilot this approach first, to assess its impact, as recommended by the No Accommodation Network (NACCOM) (Smith, 2019). Government should also extend the Homelessness Reduction Act’s ‘duty to refer’ to the Home Office, so that people leaving asylum accommodation are referred to local authority homelessness teams and receive support to avoid homelessness during this period of transition (Homeless Link and NACCOM, 2022).
  - Elsewhere in these briefings, we highlight the importance of adequate funding for local authorities to support people within their communities without recourse to public funds and the essential role of local support systems in protecting people against destitution. Government must ensure adequate funding for good-quality support in communities for people seeking asylum, including responding to the growing number of unaccompanied children and young people who are seeking asylum in the UK and who need support.

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## About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

We are an independent social change organisation, working to support and speed up the transition to a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, where people and planet can flourish.

For us, ending poverty in the UK is a moral cause: to ensure dignity and respect for everyone, and to address exclusion and powerlessness.

We are working towards our mission through policy work, research, and campaigns. We also resource and partner with organisations that are doing the difficult and important work of redesigning the world they want to live in, to achieve deep, transformative change.

All research published by JRF is available to download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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